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ABSTRACT

A year-long ethnographic case study examined two public city high school English teachers' efforts to reform their literature instruction and evaluation practices through the use of portfolios. One case study teacher ("William") has 30 years of teaching experience and was heavily influenced by New Criticism. The other teacher ("Leslie") had been teaching for one-and-a-half years and believed that literature learning involves making connections between the text and personal experience. Five focus students in each class were identified. Classrooms were observed and teachers were interviewed. Throughout the school year, William rarely deviated from "evaluative" readings of students' work. However, Leslie's response framework shifted as she struggled to balance her role as a "gatekeeper" with her role as "coach." Both teachers had difficulty discussing the focus students' literature learning in terms of specific patterns of growth even though students' portfolios were available for them to examine. Findings reveal the vulnerable position of English teachers who are unsure how to evidence success in their teaching and in their students' learning. This is especially true with the current push for greater accountability in public education. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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ROUNDTABLE SUMMARY

Assessing Literature Learning: Teachers' Response Frameworks and Descriptions of Students' Progress

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Description and Objectives: This presentation is based on a year-long ethnographic case study of two English teachers' efforts to reform their literature instruction and evaluation practices through the use of portfolios. The teachers taught at a public city high school with a culturally diverse student population and were members of a teacher-research group called the Portfolio Assessment Project. This 3-year university-school collaboration involves 13 teachers, two research assistants (of which I am one), and is directed by Alan Purves at SUNY-Albany. The teachers work as primary researchers, developing their own portfolio research questions and projects; university-based staff work to support teacher-researchers (e.g., arranging bimonthly Project meetings, providing articles on portfolios, observing their classrooms, encouraging their efforts). The presentation is based on the first year of the Project.

The research design is a qualitative, nested case study where each of the two teachers and their classrooms served as a case, with five focus students embedded within each case. One case-study teacher ("William") has been teaching 30 years; his instructional goals were heavily influenced by his background in

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New Criticism and his belief that students should heed Ciardi's advice and learn to read literature "for what it says, not for what you think it says." The other teacher ("Leslie") has been teaching 1 1/2 years; her instructional goals were informed by her belief that literature learning involves making connections between the text and personal experience. The teachers each elected their ninth-grade (middle track) classes as their research focus.

Perspectives: At the heart of the English curriculum is literature: at the secondary level, literature dominates some 50-78% of English class time (Applebee, 1990, p. 48), while at the primary level, literature is becoming a more prominent feature of the curriculum, displacing somewhat the reliance on basal readers in the teaching of reading (Langer & Allington, 1992). Yet despite literature's growing prominence in the curriculum, the goals of literature instruction remain diffuse, with no clear agreement as to what we want students to know once they "comprehend" a text. Traditionally "knowing literature" has meant being familiar with literary terms, canonic texts, standard interpretations, and (in upper-track classes) textual analysis--knowledge that could be evaluated by multiple-choice texts or short essays. Yet these marks of knowing have been criticized for their lack of emphasis on students' thinking.

In the past 20 years a growing body of work from a variety of disciplines has led many scholars and educators to broaden our

understanding of comprehension, arguing that knowing literature involved more than a static rendering; comprehension is described as "meaning-making," the process by which readers create a "poem" from the literary text (Rosenblatt, 1978). Response as a mark of knowing supports students' understandings and meaning-making processes, but there is little understanding as to how to document progress in students' meaning-making, and, indeed, what this progress looks like or even if it is likely to be evident in the course of a school year. Because response can be anything from journal entries to drawings to students' own fiction, and because a text's difficulty is determined by a variety of factors and contexts, the task of documenting literature learning over time can be quite complex.

Only very recently have researchers begun to reconceptualize evaluation in a way that makes it compatible with these dynamic and complex views of knowing (Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, & Gardner, 1991). The role of evaluation has been broadened, from merely measuring learning to supporting it and shaping instruction (Calfee & Hiebert, 1988); the focus of literacy evaluation has shifted from the identification of deficits in students' learning to providing "room" for students to voice their understandings (Genishi & Dyson, 1984). In addition, evaluation has come to be recognized as an interpretive, cultural act (Gilmore, 1987; Johnston, 1992) that is set in a dynamic relationship with instruction and teachers' beliefs about learning (Anson, 1989; Phelps, 1989; Shaughnessy, 1976). In the language arts,

portfolios are quickly becoming one of the most popular of these new assessment methods with many states, schools, districts, and teachers designing and implementing their own versions. Yet underlying the current enthusiasm for portfolios lies a concern that this fervor will quickly wane and that portfolios will end up being "about change without difference" (Roemer, 1991, p. 447).

Methods: During the 1992-1993 academic year I observed the three literature units (at the beginning, middle, and end of the year) in each of the two classrooms. During the observations I took fieldnotes and audiotaped classroom interactions, paying particular attention to teachers' oral and written responses to student work. I interviewed the teachers before and after each unit (and had on-going discussions with them about their work) and interviewed focus students at the middle and end of the year. Student work and portfolios (along with any teacher comments or marks) were photocopied. The teachers and I also discussed their portfolio plans and practices with the other teacher-researchers at bimonthly Project meetings; these meetings and other informal discussions were audiotaped.

These data were analyzed by means of analytic induction and constant comparison in which data were collected and analyzed simultaneously and emerging themes continually checked against incoming data and then modified and refined.

Results:

Teachers' response frameworks. Throughout the school year William rarely deviated from "evaluative" readings of students' work (cf., Phelps, 1989). Thus, his oral and written responses to students mostly involved making judgments and noting deficits. William felt his expertise as a teacher lay in his role as an judge: "This is why they are paying me sixty-some thousand dollars a year."

In contrast to William, Leslie's response framework shifted and changed during the school year as she struggled to balance her role as a "gatekeeper" with her role as "coach." While she had always tried to read student work "formatively," (cf., Phelps, 1989) seeing students' words and texts as evolving drafts, she also believed at the beginning of the year that students would feel "rootless" without her grading their work and hence without her evaluative readings. She felt evaluative readings were "fair" as long as she had specifically taught the skills she graded, although she realized this fairness might adversely effect their learning ("If I say, 'A piece has to have "X" amount of detail' . . . what am I doing to their own sense of how to write or think, or to come up with ideas and structure things for themselves?")

As Leslie continued to reflect on evaluation issues, she grew more uncomfortable with her evaluative readings, arguing that grades did not "open up new understandings." Her reflections on grades and judgments led her to begin to read

student work "contextually," (cf., Phelps, 1989) seeing student texts and her own judgments as situated and embedded in contexts. Thus, she began to view grades as one person's "momentary impressions" and to realize how texts were shaped by students' lives.

Teachers' understandings of students' literature learning. Both teachers had difficulty discussing focus students' literature learning in terms of specific patterns of growth even though students' portfolios were available for them to examine. William's talk focused on students' attitudes and behaviors, such as Scott's difficulty "focusing on any sort of directions"; Trisha's self-admitted "laziness"; and Craig's "conscientiousness." Leslie's descriptions focused more on students' relationships to their work (their "commitment" or "involvement") and how these attitudes changed or didn't. Yet Leslie was unsure whether qualities that she valued, such as Arnold's "open and curious mind," were simply a part of students' personality or if these qualities had developed as a result of the class. She also had difficulty discussing the literature learning of a student like Rita, who from the first day of class revealed herself in literature discussions to be "very insightful and very mature." Furthermore, she was unsure how to value Jim's learning who was "becoming more of a participant in class" but whose work was only "average" when compared to others'.

Significance of Work to the Field: Currently there is no clear

agreement as to what we want students to know once they "comprehend" a text nor is there an articulated understanding of what marks growth in literature learning. With the current push for greater accountability in public education, this study reveals the vulnerable position of English teachers who are unsure how to evidence success in their teaching and their students' learning.

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